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SUBJECT: CULTURAL AND SPORTS PROGRAMMING IN SAUDI ARABIA

REF: (A) 05 STATE 222516
(B) 05 RIYADH 9858 (NOTAL)
(C) 05 RIYADH 5164 (NOTAL)

1. (U) Summary: Cultural and sports programming in Saudi Arabia can effectively support MPP objectives and USG interests. Cultural programming has been especially useful in providing access to the 'hard to reach' groups of women and youth, and in challenging negative stereotypes of the United States. Sports programs have not yet been used in Saudi Arabia, but could prove an effective mechanism of reaching young men and expanding opportunities for young women. The programming environment can be challenging, with some educational institutions wary of cooperating with the USG. Nonetheless, creative implementation of seemingly uncontroversial programs can be extremely effective at supporting USG interests. End summary.

SUBTLE AND EFFECTIVE

2. (SBU) MPP goals of Active Anti-Terrorist Coalitions, Economic Growth and Development, Universal Human Rights Standards, and American Values Respected Abroad can all be strongly supported by cultural and sports programs. Educational reform and the presentation of 'best practices' methods are of significant interest in Saudi Arabia, and can be addressed by cultural and sports programs. Tolerance and respect for others, women's empowerment, economic and even political reform can be supported by cultural and sports programming without attracting negative attention from conservative elements of Saudi society. In "leading by example," i.e. programming an American woman to work with both Saudi men and women, PD Saudi Arabia can provide a concrete example of a highly educated and articulate woman. (Ref B) In this starkly segmented society, creating events where women are in the position of authority is useful. A Cultural Connect Envoy artist who could run workshops for groups of male and female artists would similarly encourage free thought and expression, which is often missing in Saudi schools.

3. (U) Mission Saudi Arabia has used creative methods of making the most of available resources. The public affairs office in Jeddah has held musical evenings at the CG's Residence where the public affairs officer worked with local guitarists and talented consulate staff to perform "Arabian Blues." The PAO also has hosted an evening jam session of mostly American music with an open-mike. In Dhahran, the CG hosted an art exhibit displaying the work of local Saudi artists, most of whom were women, welcoming cultural contacts from throughout the Eastern Province to the opening night. These events are inexpensive and create spaces in Saudi Arabia to support creativity, respect, and cultural exchanges. They also indicate that parts of Saudi society are interested in cultural events, given appropriate circumstances.

CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

4. (U) Within Saudi Arabia, programming opportunities vary considerably. Riyadh is generally more conservative than Jeddah or the Eastern Province. Working with the minority community of Shia is often easier than with the mainstream Sunnis, and can be useful in meeting mission reporting interests. In all areas, cultural and sports programs would be time-consuming to organize. As the public affairs sections at the three posts in Saudi Arabia slowly move back towards full staffing levels it will be possible to do more cultural programs. While VIP visits provide excellent public diplomacy opportunities, they also make it difficult to regularly contribute the necessary time to cultural programs. For all of these events, it can be helpful to program prominent Muslim-Americans, both to underscore the diversity in the United States and also because Muslim-Americans are able to access, and perhaps influence, a wider range of Saudi society. (Note: Access to Mecca and Medina is

limited to Muslims. End note.)

PEOPLE TO PEOPLE AND THE NEED FOR ART

15. (U) While expensive and time consuming in terms of recruitment, the long-run return on people-to-people exchanges is powerful. One recurring problem has been that many women cannot or will not travel without their husbands, and many have cancelled their scheduled participation in IV programs due to the restrictions on accompanying spouses, even if paying their own way. Visual art programming can also be very effective in Saudi Arabia, with a 'low-profile' approach of holding workshops with specific groups. Many arts and cultural groups are desperate for more information and trainings/workshops in new techniques, as the government schools continue to gradually eliminate art from the curriculum, even while the number of local artists and art galleries increases visibly, in both the principal cities and the provinces. In Riyadh, the "Art in Embassies" program has been launched and received a good response. Performance arts can be successful, particularly in Jeddah and with certain audiences of more elite groups. Large-scale performances of musical groups can be difficult, given the security situation, the lack of a strong musical tradition in Saudi Arabia, and the possibility of religious disapproval. (Ref C)

FILM, SPORTS, AND POETRY

16. (U) Film and video programs can be extremely useful in targeting audiences with USG policy messages. In Jeddah, for instance, the public affairs section screened "Iron Jawed Angels," a film about the struggle for the vote for women in the United States. A follow-up discussion was arranged, and DVDs donated by the director were given to major schools and universities. Such programs are inexpensive ways to reach new audiences, particularly when complemented by a visit from an American speaker. While sports programming has not been used in the past, youth centers for sports exist throughout the country and could be excellent venues to reach young Saudi men. Soccer, basketball handball, and equestrian sports are popular in Saudi Arabia. Youth centers are not open to girls or women, and public schools for girls have been forbidden from holding physical education classes. Sports programming for women would provide a unique opportunity and post believes it could be successful. In Jeddah, faculty at three women's colleges have specifically requested programs that build leadership skills, teamwork, and self-confidence, all of which could be supported by targeted sports programming.

17. (U) Culturally, poetry has long been an important part of the lives of people in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, poetry is one of the few traditional arts continuing to thrive in modern Saudi Arabia. Saudis are avid readers and reciters of poetry, and Saudi newspapers frequently publish large amounts of poetry, written in both classical Arabic and Saudi dialect. Poetry readings can be successful venues for creativity, cultural exchange, and challenging stereotypes about Americans. In Jeddah, the public affairs section held an energizing poetry reading in November 2005; audience members composed poems during the event. More exploration of ways to use poetry in cultural activities would be valuable.

OFFERING UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

18. (U) Cultural and sports activities in Saudi Arabia often face many restrictions. Thus, many communities are very interested in our programs because they have few opportunities to explore art, music, and even sports elsewhere. The US Mission to Saudi Arabia is in a unique position to respond to these interests, and we can do so in ways that promote our freedom and democracy agenda, support MPP goals, and foster the development of common values among hard-to-reach groups of Saudis.

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